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CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD

The Last Year

SWAMI SARADANANDA

The Sympathy for Religions

SWAMI SATPRAKASHANANDA

The Last Message of Sri Krishna

DORINE SHEPHERD

What Vedanta Means to Me



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167



VEDANTA SOCIETY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Vedanta Press

1946 VEDANTA PLACE • HOLLYWOOD, CALIFORNIA 90028

First Published May-June, 1964

Six numbers of *Vedanta and the West* are issued yearly. Subscriptions are accepted at \$4.00 for six issues, postage paid, \$6.00 for twelve issues, or \$7.50 for eighteen issues. Published issues are available at seventy-five cents each through book-sellers or by writing the publisher.

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Printed in the United States of America

C O N T E N T S

- The Last Year** 7
Christopher Isherwood
This twentieth chapter of a forthcoming biography describes the concluding events of Sri Ramakrishna's life, his final instructions to his disciples, and his mahasamadhi.
- The Sympathy for Religions** 37
Swami Saradananda
Closer co-operation among the different religions of the world is discussed in the light of Vedanta.
- The Last Message of Sri Krishna** 43
Swami Satprakashananda
Sri Krishna's teachings on the love and knowledge of God from the Bhagavatam, one of the most authoritative Sanskrit scriptures, are reviewed by the head of the Vedanta Society of St. Louis.
- What Vedanta Means to Me** 61
Dorine Shepherd
An American devotee tells of her search for God and shares some insights she has gained through her study of Vedanta.
- About This Issue** 63

THE LAST YEAR

CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD

The twentieth chapter of a forthcoming book on Ramakrishna

THE EARLY PART of 1885 was unusually hot. Since Ramakrishna suffered from the heat, the devotees suggested that he should suck pieces of ice and put ice in his sugared drinks. He became very fond of ice. However, when, toward the end of April, he began to complain of a pain in his throat, the devotees blamed the ice, and themselves.

The pain was caused by a sore, which did not yield to treatment but grew gradually worse. The doctor advised Ramakrishna not to talk more than was absolutely necessary and to avoid, if he possibly could, going into samadhi. In samadhi the blood rushes to the throat, and the doctor feared that this would aggravate Ramakrishna's condition.

In May, the Vaishnavas held an annual festival at the village of Panihati, on the bank of the Ganges, a few miles upriver from Dakshineswar. The festival commemorated an occasion on which Sri Nityananda, the chief disciple of Sri Chaitanya, was entertained at a feast in this same village by Raghunath, a householder devotee. Nityananda encouraged Raghunath to persevere in begging Chaitanya's permission to renounce the world and become a monk.

Ramakrishna had attended the Panihati festival many times already; but this year he wanted to take his young disciples, who had never seen it. When objections were made to this expedition because of his illness, he brushed them aside,

saying that he would only stay an hour or two and that he would be careful not to go into samadhi. It was agreed that he must not take part in the *kirtan*, the singing of holy songs, as this invariably threw him into ecstasy.

After visiting the home of a wealthy landowner and resting there for a little while, Ramakrishna and his party went to watch the dancing and singing in the courtyard of the Radhakanta Temple. As they stood there, a man dressed as a Vaishnava began to dance and shout in an apparently ecstatic state. Ramakrishna knew him at once for an impostor. Smiling indulgently, he whispered to Naren, "what a fake!" He seemed to be observing the scene objectively, with perfectly controlled emotions; and the young disciples felt reassured. But the very next moment, before any of them could stop him, he bounded down into the midst of the dancers and went into samadhi. The disciples could do nothing but crowd around and watch. Sarat (Saradananda), who was present, describes how Ramakrishna then regained partial outer consciousness and started dancing with a power and beauty such as the boys had never seen before. Sometimes, says Saradananda, he strode like a lion; sometimes he moved like a fish swimming in a sea of ecstasy. His body was so flexible that one could not believe it contained hard bones; the music seemed to pass through it in visible waves.

In about half an hour, Ramakrishna began to come to himself, and the disciples urged him to leave the kirtan party and start for home, after first paying homage to some sacred images which were lodged in a nearby shrine. Ramakrishna agreed; but, as they left the temple, the kirtan players, who had no idea that he was ailing, followed them, still singing their songs. Ramakrishna therefore kept stopping and going into samadhi and their progress was very slow. All of them witnessed, that day, the phenomenon which has already been

referred to in this story. Saradananda says that Ramakrishna's figure appeared to grow taller and become luminous, "like a body seen in a dream." His skin was much lighter than usual and actually shone; it seemed to blend with the bright ochre color of his silk wearing-cloth so that he looked as if enclosed in flames. The kirtan players were amazed and enraptured. They started to sing a hymn to Nitai (Nityananda), making the words refer to Ramakrishna himself.

It seems that our Nitai, the love-giver, is here!
Here comes our Nitai, bringing divine love!
Without him, how could our heart's longing be appeased?
Here is our Nitai, the love-giver!

Again and again, pointing their fingers at Ramakrishna, they sang, "here is our love-giver!" Other kirtan parties joined in the singing, and soon nearly all of the devotees who had come to the festival surrounded Ramakrishna in a vast excited throng.

An ugly twisted man in the garb of a wandering monk snatched a plate of prasad from a woman devotee and with his own hand put some of the food into Ramakrishna's mouth. Ramakrishna did not resist, being in samadhi; but, as soon as he was touched, he winced and returned to outer consciousness, spitting out the food and then washing his mouth. The onlookers concluded that the man must be somehow unclean and a hypocrite; they regarded him scornfully and he slunk away, humiliated. Ramakrishna confirmed their suspicions by willingly taking prasad from another of the devotees.

The immense crowd further retarded Ramakrishna's progress, and it was nearly four hours later that he and his disciples finally reached the boat that was to take them back

to Dakshineswar. A devotee named Navachaitanya Mitra came running in wild haste and threw himself at Ramakrishna's feet, weeping and begging for his grace. Ramakrishna touched him and he became ecstatic, dancing and singing the Master's praises until he was calmed by a second touch. Navachaitanya had met Ramakrishna several times previously, but this experience changed his life. He put his son in charge of the family and retired to live in solitude on the bank of the Ganges.

AFTER the visit to Panihati, Ramakrishna's throat grew worse. It had rained on and off during that day, so the doctors blamed the weather. Ramakrishna himself, with typical mischievousness, blamed Ramchandra and some of the other older devotees, saying that he would never have gone to the festival if they had forbidden him more energetically. The doctors gave him an internal salve and a plaster to put on the outside of the throat, without causing any improvement. They also told him not to talk, but he disobeyed them.

By now, July was half over. Ramakrishna was in considerable pain and his throat was so much swollen that he could swallow no solid food and had to live on milk with cream of wheat boiled in it. The doctors decided that he was suffering from what was called in those days "clergyman's sore throat," a form of laryngitis brought on by overstraining the voice. They prescribed medicine and diet but Ramakrishna continued to break their two principal rules: he went into samadhi and he talked. Devotees were coming to visit him in ever increasing numbers and he never refused to instruct them. However, he would keep complaining to the Divine Mother, "why do you bring so many people here? There's such a crowd I don't have time to wash or eat. This body's nothing but a drum with holes in it—how long can it last if it's played day and night?"

During the month of September, a lady invited some of the young disciples and householder devotees to have supper at her house. She knew that Ramakrishna was sick but, with the ruthlessness of a hostess, she nevertheless sent him a message pressing him to come, even if only for a few minutes. The messenger returned to report that this was out of the question; Ramakrishna's throat had started to bleed. All the guests were dismayed, and Naren became silent and very grave. Later, he told them, "He who has made us all so happy may be going to leave us. I've been reading medical books and questioning friends who are doctors. They say that this kind of throat ailment can develop into cancer. And now this bleeding makes me even more afraid that that's what it is. If so, there is no known cure for it."

It was therefore agreed that Ramakrishna must be put under a more systematic and efficient treatment without delay. Next day, some of the older householder devotees went to Dakshineswar and persuaded him that he could be better cared for if he moved into Calcutta. A few days later, they were able to rent a small house in the Baghbazar district. From its roof the Ganges could be seen, and this was regarded as a great asset, since Ramakrishna loved the river so dearly. Nevertheless, when they brought him there, he declared at once that he could not stay a single night; the place seemed unbearably shut in after the spaciousness of the Dakshineswar gardens. He actually walked to the house of Balaram Bose, who received him lovingly and begged him to remain there until a more suitable lodging could be found.

Meanwhile, the devotees called in several well-known Calcutta physicians to examine Ramakrishna. They all diagnosed cancer, and their attitude was pessimistic; but they were prepared to treat him to the best of their ability. The devotees chose Dr. Mahendralal Sarkar, chiefly because he was a

homeopathist. Homeopathy—which was being much discussed at that period—is a method of treating a patient by drugs which would produce, in a healthy person, symptoms like those of the patient's disease. These drugs are usually administered in minute quantities. The devotees therefore knew that Dr. Sarkar would not overdose Ramakrishna; too much medicine had always seemed to disagree with him. Under the circumstances, this was probably as good a reason for choosing a doctor as any other.

The news of Ramakrishna's move to Calcutta spread by word of mouth all over the city. Crowds of people, both friends and strangers, invaded Balaram's house from early morning till night, and Ramakrishna was available to them all day long, with a break of only two hours for his midday meal and rest. It was as if he had come to Calcutta for their greater convenience, to spare them the journey to Dakshineswar, rather than for his own medical care. Very few of those who saw him can have dreamed that he was mortally ill. He spoke of God with his customary fervor and went frequently into samadhi.

In a few days, another house was found—55 Shyampukur Street—and Ramakrishna moved into it after having stayed at Balaram's about a week. The rooms which could be occupied by him and his devotees were all on the upper floor of the house, and there were not enough of them for comfort. There was no one able to cook food in the way that Ramakrishna needed; so Sarada Devi, who was still at Dakshineswar, had to be asked if she would do this. Sarada's shyness was well known; it was a real ordeal for her to live in a house full of men. But she came to Shyampukur Street nevertheless, and managed to do her cooking on a tiny covered terrace near the door which led to the roof. When the food had to be served, it would either be fetched by one of the devotees or brought

to Ramakrishna by Sarada herself, after everyone else had been asked to leave his room. She would not come down to her own room to sleep until the others had retired for the night; and, since there was only one bathroom, she would get up at three in the morning so as to be able to use it in complete privacy.

It was found that Dr. Sarkar had met Ramakrishna already, many years previously, while visiting Dakshineswar to attend Mathur and his family. When he came to examine Ramakrishna, he recognized him at once. The doctor charged a fee for his first visit. But when he had learned that the entire cost of Ramakrishna's lodging, food and nursing was to be borne by the devotees—even though this could mean rationing the food for themselves and their children, pawning family ornaments and mortgaging their homes—he announced that in future he would attend Ramakrishna free of charge. At first, Dr. Sarkar did not give up all hope of his patient's recovery. He believed that the disease might possibly be curable, though admittedly the cure would be difficult and lengthy.

The devotees were united in their readiness to make drastic material sacrifices for their Master. But, as the weeks passed, they became divided into three groups, each with a different interpretation of the meaning of his illness.

The first group, which was headed by Girish Ghosh, reasoned as follows: The Master is a divine incarnation. Therefore he is not subject to karma, in the form of illness or mishap. If he is sick, then he is sick for some purpose of his own; and, in this sense, it is a kind of play acting. As soon as his purpose has been fulfilled, he will cast off the appearance of sickness and return at once to normal health.

The second group stressed the fact that Ramakrishna had always declared himself to be the child and instrument of the Divine Mother, with no will other than her will. Therefore,

they reasoned, it is the Mother who has made the Master sick. No doubt she is doing this, in some way, for the good of humanity. We cannot know what her purpose is. Indeed, it is possible that the Master himself does not know. We can only be sure that, when the Mother's purpose has been fulfilled, the Master will recover.

The third group disagreed radically with this (from a practical viewpoint) fatalistic attitude. They believed just as firmly as the others in the divinity of the Master's nature; but they drew a clear distinction between that divine nature and the physical nature of the body in which he was now living on earth. This body, they said, was mortal like any other and subject to disease from natural causes. Therefore it could be healed by human science; and it was the duty of the Master's devotees to use the help of this science, instead of passively waiting for God's will to be revealed. This group was headed by Naren and it contained most if not all of the young monastic disciples.

DR. SARKAR soon became fascinated by Ramakrishna. He would visit him daily at different hours, so as to watch him in various conditions. In order to do this, the Doctor neglected his paying patients. "I have made you talk too much," he would say. "That was unwise. But don't talk to anyone else for the rest of the day. Then no harm will be done."

When Sarkar learned that many of the devotees regarded Ramakrishna as a divine incarnation, his scientific scepticism was affronted. "Divine incarnation," he exclaimed scornfully, "what kind of a thing is that? To grovel before a human being who excretes filth—how ridiculous!" He would declare that he himself admired Ramakrishna simply for his love of truth.

However, the Doctor had another side to his character.

M. tells how he admitted that, "that fellow the intellect is extremely narrow-minded; if he meets any difficulty, he cries 'impossible!' But the heart doesn't believe in impossibilities—and that's how all real discoveries are made and will be made in the future." No doubt Sarkar enjoyed playing the down-to-earth scientist in order to shock the more sentimental among the devotees. At the same time, he maintained an admirable open-mindedness. When two of the young disciples went into ecstasy after singing religious songs, Sarkar took their pulses and agreed that they had genuinely lost consciousness of external objects, as though they had fainted. Then Ramakrishna passed his hand over their chests and uttered the name of God, making them conscious again. Sarkar said, "this seems to be all your play." Ramakrishna answered smiling, "not my play but God's." During the Durga Puja, Sarkar took the opportunity of examining Ramakrishna with a stethoscope while he was in samadhi. No heartbeat could be detected. He also touched Ramakrishna's eyeball with his finger. There was no reaction. The Doctor recorded these facts and said he was unable to explain them.

Ramakrishna showed much affection for Sarkar and enjoyment of their talks. One day, he impulsively put his feet in the Doctor's lap, and then told him, "you are certainly very pure. Otherwise, I couldn't have put my feet in your lap." He described how the Divine Mother had made it known to him in a vision that Sarkar would accumulate a great deal of knowledge but that it would be "dry knowledge." Then he added, smiling, "but you will soften."

Dr. Sarkar was exceedingly strict about Ramakrishna's diet. One day, when Ramakrishna's condition had taken a turn for the worse, he traced the cause to the presence of cauliflower juice in the soup. And yet, with all his strictness, he seems to have made up his mind quite soon that the case was

hopeless. On October 25th, M. was alone with Sarkar and told him that one of the devotees believed Ramakrishna had created the disease merely to "pamper the Doctor's ego" and that he could cure himself whenever he wished. Sarkar exclaimed impatiently that this was nonsense. "The disease is incurable," he added. "There's no doubt about that." ✚

EARLY in November came the day for the celebration of the Kali Puja. On Ramakrishna's instructions, a small ceremony was arranged to be held in his room. About thirty people gathered there. Everything was ready. But Ramakrishna himself made no move to take part in the worship. Then Girish Ghosh had an inspiration: the Master must be giving them this opportunity of worshipping the Divine Mother within his own body. So he took flowers and sandal paste and offered them at Ramakrishna's feet, exclaiming, "glory to the Divine Mother!" A thrill passed through Ramakrishna's body and he went into samadhi. Girish's action was then imitated by M., Rakhal and all the other devotees in turn. M. writes that, as they looked at Ramakrishna, his face was transformed and began to shine with an unearthly light, and his hands assumed the traditional gestures of the Divine Mother, one of them conferring blessings, the other bidding the devotees to be without fear.

GENUINE and deep as Girish's devotion to Ramakrishna was, it set an example which could be unwholesome for smaller natures. Such people were apt to infer from Girish's life and behavior that religion was a mere matter of emotion, tear-shedding, ecstatic singing and dancing. Even Girish's famous granting of "the power of attorney" to Ramakrishna sounded

delightfully easy to many who had absolutely no notion what true self-surrender means.

It may be imagined how vigorously Naren attacked this attitude. He pointed out that Ramakrishna had been through long years of the strictest self-discipline and that his ecstasy was the fruit of that discipline, not a superficial emotionalism. "When people try to practice religion," said Naren, "eighty per cent of them turn into cheats, and about fifteen per cent go mad. It's only the remaining five per cent who get some direct knowledge of the Truth and so become blessed. Therefore, beware!"

At first, even the young disciples were unwilling to agree with Naren; they felt he was being too severe. But then it was discovered that several devotees were actually trying to induce the outer physical symptoms of samadhi and imitate the movements of one who is dancing in a state of ecstasy. Naren reasoned with these devotees and persuaded them to stop starving themselves and eat wholesome food, and to try to control their emotions instead of cultivating hysteria. The result was an increase in spirituality and a decrease in outward show. For the few who would not be persuaded, Naren had a more drastic form of treatment; he made such fun of their posturings that the other devotees laughed at them, shaming them into common sense.

WHILE he was at Shyampukur, Ramakrishna had a vision in which he saw his subtle body emerge from his gross physical body while he was walking about the room. He observed that the back of the subtle body was covered with sores, especially where the trunk joined the throat. He wondered why this was so. The Divine Mother explained to him that many people who had committed evil deeds had touched him and thus become

pure. Their bad karma had been transferred to him and had produced the sores on his body. Ramakrishna did not seem at all disturbed by this discovery. Indeed, he said repeatedly that he was ready to be reborn many thousands of times more, if his incarnations could be of service to others. However, Naren and the young disciples, when they were told of the vision, determined that no newcomer should be allowed to touch Ramakrishna as long as he was sick. They also tried to cut down the ever growing number of visitors by ruling that no one could be admitted who was not known to at least one of the regular devotees.

Girish Ghosh said of these restrictions, "there's no harm in trying, but it isn't possible to stop people from seeing the Master, for that's the whole purpose of his coming to earth." As for Ramakrishna, he continued to talk about God to anyone and everyone who could get into his room. One day, he was teaching a young man the best postures for meditation on God with form and without form. "But I can't show you any more," he added. "As soon as I sit in that posture, the mind becomes absorbed in samadhi and the vital force of the body rises. That hurts the sore in my throat. So the doctor has told me particularly that there mustn't be any samadhi." "Then why have you been showing me all these things?" the young man exclaimed, in dismay, "you shouldn't have done that!" "I know," said Ramakrishna, "but I had to show you something."

During one of Ramakrishna's visits to the Star Theater in 1884, he had greatly praised an actress who played the part of the young Chaitanya. At the end of the play, Ramakrishna had passed into samadhi, and this actress had taken the opportunity to bow down and touch his feet. Since then, she had become his devotee, regarding him as a divine incarnation. When she heard of his illness, she determined to see him once again.

In those days, actresses in the Bengali theater were regarded as no better than prostitutes—a prejudice which also persisted in England until at least the beginning of the nineteenth century. It was therefore unthinkable that the strict young disciples would allow her inside the house. So the actress went to a devotee named Kalipada Ghosh and asked for his help. Kalipada was a close friend of Girish Ghosh and, like him, believed that Ramakrishna was an avatar and his illness a play, and that therefore he could not possibly be harmed by anybody's touch, even if it were impure. He dressed the actress up in male European clothes—such as were fashionable at that time among the young men of Bengal—and brought her thus disguised to Shyampukur. They were able to enter Ramakrishna's room at a time when no other visitors were present. Kalipada immediately told Ramakrishna who the supposed young man really was, and Ramakrishna laughed heartily, praising the actress' courage and devotion. He gave her some spiritual instruction and allowed her to touch his feet with her forehead. When she and Kalipada had left, he told the disciples of the trick which had been played on them, with so much enjoyment that they could not be angry.

MEANWHILE, Ramakrishna's condition grew steadily worse. Dr. Sarkar became convinced that the polluted air of Calcutta was harming him. The Doctor therefore advised a second move—to a house outside the city. A garden house was found in the northwestern suburbs, on the way to Dakshineswar: 90 Cossipore Road. The rent was eighty rupees a month; somewhat higher than the rent at Shyampukur. When Ramakrishna heard this, he called Surendra Nath Mitra to him and asked him to undertake to pay the whole amount, saying that the financial strain on the other, poorer devotees would be too

great. Surendra gladly agreed to this. The move was made on December 11, 1885, shortly before the end of the Hindu month of Agrahayan. Some haste was necessary, because custom forbids a change of dwelling during Paush, the month that follows it.

The Cossipore house stood in a pleasant garden of about four and a half acres which contained a small pool and a much larger pond and was planted with fruit trees—mango, jack fruit and lichee—as well as vegetables for use in the kitchen. The house was a two-story building, more spacious than the house at Shyampukur. (Vivekananda had always wished that the Cossipore property could belong to the Ramakrishna Order. It was finally purchased by the Order in 1946, but, by then, the house was much dilapidated. It has since been torn down and replaced by a new building made to look as nearly as possible like the original at the time of Ramakrishna's occupancy.)

Since the Cossipore house was far from those parts of Calcutta in which most of the boys had their homes, Naren decided that they would have to live on the premises; otherwise they would not be able to take their turns at the night-nursing. The boys all agreed to this arrangement, although many of their parents or guardians were strongly against it. So now, for the first time, they found themselves making a deliberate choice between home-life and life with their Master; a first step, in fact, toward renouncing the world. Naren himself was not even as free as the rest of them because he had the responsibility to his family which had fallen on him after his father's death. At that time, he still planned to support his mother and brothers by becoming an attorney—a project which he soon afterward abandoned—and was studying for his bar examinations. However, he resolved somehow to find time at Cossipore for his studying.

His presence there was certainly needed. The boys were relying on him more and more for leadership and inspiration. Naturally enough, some of them were troubled by doubts. What was this way of life to which they were committing themselves? Did they really want to become monks? Could they dare to say that they knew better than their own fathers, who kept telling them that this was all madness? And now their Master, whom they had learned to look upon as a superhuman being, was wasting away before their eyes. . . . One day, a rumor somehow spread among them that his horrible disease was infectious. When the time came to attend him, some of them hung back. Naren found out the reason of their fear and forced them all into Ramakrishna's room. In a corner was a cup with the remains of some gruel which he had been unable to finish; it was mixed with his saliva. Naren picked up the cup without hesitation and swallowed its contents.

One night, Naren could not sleep. Finding that Sarat and a few of the others were awake, he said to them, "come, let's stroll in the garden and have a smoke." While they were walking there, Naren said, "the Master's disease is very bad—who knows, he may have made up his mind to abandon the body? So let us now make as much spiritual progress as we possibly can—by service to him and by meditation and devotion. Otherwise, when he leaves us, how shall we ever forgive ourselves? Are we going to put off calling on the Lord until all our worldly desires are satisfied? See how we're letting the days slip by! We're getting more and more tied up in this net of desires—they'll be the death and destruction of us! Let's give them up! Yes, let's give them all up!" Naren sat down under a tree. The others did likewise. Then, seeing a heap of dead grass and broken branches lying nearby, Naren said, "let's set fire to them. Holy men light dhuni fires at this hour of the night, to burn up their desires. Let's do the same." So they made a

fire. As the flames rose, they felt an extraordinary bliss; as if their desires were indeed being consumed. "Why did we never do this before?" someone said; and they resolved to light dhuni fires whenever they got the opportunity. By the time they had run out of fuel, it was four o'clock in the morning.

SHORTLY after his arrival at Cossipore, Ramakrishna was able to walk for a little while in the garden. The devotees were glad, thinking that the exercise would build up his strength; but instead it seemed to exhaust him. So the Doctor recommended a broth of kid's meat. This produced a slight improvement. As at Shyampukur, Sarada Devi had charge of the cooking, but now she was helped by Ramakrishna's niece Lakshmi Devi, the daughter of his brother Rameswar.

The pioneer exponent of homeopathic medicine in Calcutta was Rajendra Nath Datta. It was he who had originally converted Dr. Sarkar to this method of treatment. Rajendra Nath knew that if he could cure Ramakrishna he would win a spectacular victory for the cause of homeopathy; so he now asked Dr. Sarkar for permission to examine his patient. Dr. Sarkar did not object; although he was one of the most famous doctors in the city, he was admirably free from professional vanity. After careful consideration, Rajendra Nath treated Ramakrishna with the drug he had selected, lycopodium (200). Ramakrishna appeared to respond to this treatment for a few weeks, and the hopes of the devotees rose accordingly.

Meanwhile, he showed an ever increasing love for his disciples and devotees. M. describes how, on the morning of December 23rd he said to Niranjana, "you're my father—I'll sit on your lap!" Touching the chest of Kalipada Ghosh, he said, "may your spirit be awakened!" He blessed two women devotees, and they shed tears of joy.

In the evening, he asked M. how long it would take him to recover. M. answered evasively that it would perhaps take five or six months. Ramakrishna behaved as if surprised and impatient. "As long as that?" he exclaimed. And he added, "how is it that I am so ill—in spite of all these visions, and this ecstasy and samadhi?" As on similar occasions, one seems to detect a teasing and testing of his companions.

"It was revealed to me in a vision," he continued, "that during my last days, I should have to live on pudding. One day—since I've had this disease—my wife brought me pudding to eat. I burst into tears and I said to her, 'is this what it meant about my last days—living on pudding, and so painfully, too?' "

It was in December, also, that a pandit named Sasadhar came to Cossipore. He said to Ramakrishna: "The Scriptures tell us that a paramahansa like yourself can cure his physical sicknesses by his own will power. Why don't you try it, Sir?"

"You call yourself a pandit," exclaimed Ramakrishna, "and you can make such a suggestion! This mind has been given up to God, once and for all. How can I withdraw it from him and make it dwell on this worthless body?"

Sasadhar was silenced. But, after he had left, Naren and the others who had been present begged Ramakrishna to cure himself—for their sake if not for his own. "Do you think I'm suffering like this because I want to?" Ramakrishna retorted. "Of course I want to get better! But it all depends on Mother." "Then please pray to her," said Naren. "She can't refuse to listen." Ramakrishna protested that he could never utter such words. But they continued to plead with him and at last he agreed that he would do what he could. A few hours later, Naren asked him, "well, did you pray to her?" And Ramakrishna told him, "I said to Mother, 'I can't eat anything because of this pain—please let me eat a little!' But she pointed

to all of you and said, 'why, you're eating through so many mouths already!' So then I felt ashamed and couldn't utter another word."

AT DAKSHINESWAR, even as much as five years before the onset of this disease, Ramakrishna had spoken from time to time about the circumstances which would indicate his approaching death. "When you see me staying nights in Calcutta, and taking food from anyone and everyone, without distinction, and even eating part of the food which has been given to someone else—then you'll know that my end is coming." Again, he had said, "before I go, I'll cast my whole secret to the winds. When many people have discovered who I really am and start to whisper about it, then this body will cease to exist, by the Mother's will. At that time, it will be shown which of the devotees belong to the inner circle and which to the outer." And now at Cossipore, Ramakrishna repeated and clarified this last statement. "The devotees are being sifted by this illness," he said, "it is showing who belongs to the inner circle and who to the outer. Those who are living here, renouncing the world, belong to the inner circle; and those who pay occasional visits and ask, 'how are you, Sir?'—they belong to the outer."

Ramakrishna's prediction that "I'll cast my whole secret to the winds"—in other words, that he would publicly declare and demonstrate his divine nature—must certainly have referred to the events of January 1, 1886. On the afternoon of that day, Ramakrishna, who was still maintaining the slight improvement apparently caused by Rajendra Nath's treatment, said he felt strong enough to take a walk in the garden. This was about three o'clock. As the day was a holiday, householder devotees had been arriving since noon to visit the Mas-

ter; by the time he came downstairs from his room more than thirty of them were gathered in groups in the garden or inside the hall of the house. Seeing him, they all rose and bowed reverently. Ramakrishna began walking slowly through the garden toward the gate, with the devotees following him at a respectful distance.

Girish Ghosh was sitting under a tree in conversation with some friends. As Ramakrishna approached, they rose and came to meet him. "Well, Girish," said Ramakrishna, without any preliminary salutation, "I hear you're saying all these things about me to everyone, wherever you go. What is it you see in me, that you can say such things?"

Falling to his knees on the ground and folding his palms, Girish answered in a voice choking with emotion, "who am I to speak of him? The sages Vyasa and Valmiki could have found no words to measure his glory!"

Ramakrishna seemed delighted. He blessed Girish and the assembled devotees, exclaiming, "what more need I tell you? Be illumined!" Then he went into samadhi. At this, an overwhelming fervor possessed the devotees; forgetting that they were not to touch the Master, they began taking the dust of his feet, crying, "jai" (meaning "hail to," or literally "victory to") "*Sri Ramakrishna!*" And now Ramakrishna began to touch them, one after another. Some became ecstatic. Others felt themselves endowed with a power for profound meditation. All said later that they felt Ramakrishna had that afternoon for the first time revealed himself as a divine incarnation.

It so happened that none of the young disciples were then present in the garden. Naren and several of the others were asleep inside the house, having attended the Master or meditated throughout the previous night. Latu and Sarat were on the roof of the house and saw what was going on. One of the devotees shouted to them ecstatically to come down without

delay and share the Master's blessing. But the boys would not do so. They had seized the opportunity to sweep out his room and air his bedding in the sunshine, and—believing, as Naren had taught them, that service to the guru is more important than any individual mystical experience—they would not leave their work half done. Not long after this, Ramakrishna returned to normal consciousness. He then went back into the house.

Saradananda sums up the significance of this event as follows: "The Master, by revealing his true nature to the devotees, set them free from fear."

ON January 2nd, Naren had an experience which he described two days later to M: "I was meditating here last Saturday when I suddenly felt a peculiar sensation in my heart. It was probably the awakening of the kundalini. I clearly perceived the ida and pingala nerves. Yesterday, I told the Master about it. I said to him, 'the others have had their realization, please let me have it too. Am I the only one who has to stay unsatisfied?' He said, 'why don't you settle your family affairs first? Then you can have everything. . . . What is it you want?' I said, 'I want to remain in samadhi for three or four days, only coming down to the sense-plane once in a while, to eat a little.' Then he said to me, 'you're a fool—there's a much higher state than that! You are fond of singing the song, "All that exists art Thou"—well, after coming down from samadhi, one may see that it is God himself who has become the universe and all that exists. Only an ishwarakoti can reach that state. An ordinary man can only reach samadhi, at best. He can't go any farther.'

"So this morning, I went home. My family scolded me, saying 'why do you wander about like a vagabond? Your bar

examination will soon be here, and you're not attending to your studies.' I went to study at my grandmother's. But when I tried to begin reading, I was overcome by great fear. I felt that study was something terribly evil. I burst into tears—I've never cried so bitterly in my life before. I left my books and ran out of the house. I ran through the streets. My shoes flew off—I don't know where they went. I ran past a stack of straw and got straw all over me. I went on running until I got here."

THE SLIGHT improvement in Ramakrishna's condition came to an end, and now the disease made steady progress. His body became dreadfully emaciated, until it was almost a skeleton. He could speak only in hoarse whispers; sometimes he was reduced to making signs. The haemorrhages in his throat were frequent, and he was often in great pain. But, throughout these final months of physical deterioration, he remained essentially himself, a being of manifest spiritual power, selfless love and keen intuition. His mind never seemed at all clouded by his sufferings and his cheerfulness was astonishing. He would say, "oh my mind, remain in bliss; let the body and its pain look after each other." He told Naren, "I am leaving the boys in your care. See that they practice their meditation and worship. Don't let them go back home." One day, he asked them all to take begging-bowls and beg their food in the streets, in the manner of wandering monks. They enjoyed doing this, and they brought back the various kinds of raw food they had been given, and cooked them. They offered some to the Master. He took a few grains of rice, saying, "well done! This food is very pure."

During the night of March 14th, he whispered to M., "I've gone on suffering like this because I'm afraid you'll shed so many tears if I leave you. But, if you all tell me, 'that's enough suffering—let the body go,' then I may give it up."

The next morning, however, he was eager to speak of his spiritual experiences, although he could only do so in whispers. "Do you know what I see at this moment? God has become everything. Men and women are just frameworks covered with skin—it is he who is moving their heads and limbs. I had a vision like this, once before—that the gardens and houses and roads and men and cattle were made of wax. I see that God himself has become the block and the executioner and the sacrificial victim. . . . Ah, what a vision!"

"There sits Latu, resting his head on the palm of his hand. But I see that it's the Lord himself who rests his head on his hand."

"If this body were to be preserved a short while longer, many people would become spiritually awakened. . . . But, no—that won't happen. This time, the body will not be preserved . . ."

"There are two persons in this body—one is the Divine Mother—yes, the Mother is one of them—the other is her devotee. It's the devotee who broke his arm. It's the devotee who is now sick. . . . Do you understand? Alas—to whom shall I tell all this? Who'll understand me?"

"God becomes man, an avatar, and comes to earth with his devotees. And the devotees leave the world with him when he leaves it—"

At this point, Rakhal, who was present in the room with Naren, M. and others, said, "so we beg you not to go away and leave us behind!"

Ramakrishna smiled: "A band of minstrels suddenly appears, dances and sings. Then, just as suddenly, it departs. They arrive and they leave, without anybody recognizing them."

Presently Naren said, "some people get angry with me when I talk to them about renunciation."

"One *must* renounce!" said Ramakrishna. Then, pointing to his limbs, he went on, "if one thing is placed upon another, you must take away the one to get at the other. How can you get at the second thing without removing the first? When you see everything filled with God and nothing but God, how can you see anything else?"

Naren asked, "must one renounce the world?"

"How can you see the world, if you see nothing but God? Didn't I just say that? But I'm talking about mental renunciation. Not one of those who have come here is a worldly person. Perhaps some of them had a little bit of desire—for woman, for instance—" (At this, both Rakhal and M. smiled) "But the desire has been satisfied."

Ramakrishna looked at them all with eyes that were full of love. Then he exclaimed, "grand!"

"What's grand?" Naren asked.

"I see that everything is being made ready for a grand renunciation!"

ALTHOUGH this remark sounds like a prophecy, the "grand renunciation" had in fact already been begun. In January 1886, Gopal Sur, who had just returned from a pilgrimage, told Ramakrishna that he wanted to present monastic ocher wearing-cloths and rosaries of rudraksha beads to some of the monks who were passing through Calcutta. "Why not give them to these boys?" Ramakrishna asked, indicating Naren and some of the other disciples. "They are full of the spirit of renunciation. You won't find any better monks anywhere." Gopal had twelve pieces of cloth and twelve rosaries; these he handed over to the Master. One evening, Ramakrishna distributed them, putting the disciples who received them through a special ceremony and then giving them permission to accept

food, like real monks, from anybody, regardless of caste or creed. These disciples were Naren, Rakhal, Jogindra, Baburam, Niranjan, Tarak, Sarat, Shashi, Gopal Sur, Kali and Latu. The twelfth cloth and rosary were put aside for Girish. In this sense it may be said that the Ramakrishna Order was founded by Ramakrishna himself, although it did not come into official existence until after his death.

Now that it became tragically obvious that medical science had failed and that Ramakrishna was dying, Sarada Devi made up her mind to try to save him by fasting and prayer. So she went to the temple of Shiva at Tarakeshwar, and lay down before the shrine for two days without food or drink, begging for a miraculous cure. Speaking of this fast in her later years, she would describe how, "during the night of the second day, I was startled to hear a crackling sound, as if a pile of earthenware pots were being broken by a single blow. I came out of the stupor in which I had been lying, and the idea flashed through my mind: 'What is a husband? What is a wife? What are worldly relationships? Why am I about to kill myself?' All my ego-attachment to the Master disappeared. My mind was possessed by complete renunciation. I groped through the darkness and sprinkled my face with holy water from the small tank behind the temple. I also drank a little, as my throat was parched with thirst. I felt refreshed. The next morning, I came back to the Cossipore Garden. When the Master saw me, he seemed amused. He asked, 'well—did you get what you wanted?' Then he said, 'you got nothing.' "

ONE EVENING, while Naren was meditating, he felt as if a lamp had begun to burn behind his head. The light grew more and

more intense, until it seemed that the lamp itself burst. Naren went into samadhi. When, after a while, he became partly aware of his surroundings, he felt that he had somehow lost his body and was nothing but a head. "Where's my body?" he shouted. Gopal Sur heard him and came into the room. "Where's my body?" Naren repeated. "Why, it's here, Naren. Can't you feel it?" asked Gopal. But Naren continued to cry out for his body, until Gopal, in alarm, ran to tell Ramakrishna what had happened. Ramakrishna did not seem at all surprised. "Let him stay like that for a while," he said calmly. "He's been bothering me long enough to put him into that state."

As Naren's mind came slowly down to the normal plane, he felt a marvelous peace. He hastened to Ramakrishna's room. "Now Mother has shown you everything," Ramakrishna told him. "But what she has shown will be hidden from you. It will be shut up in a box, like a jewel—and I'll keep the key. When you've finished doing Mother's work on earth, then the box will be unlocked and you'll know everything you knew just now."

Later, Ramakrishna told the other disciples, "Naren will give up his body of his own free will. When he knows who he really is, he'll refuse to stay on this earth. Very soon, he's going to shake the world with his intellect and his spiritual power. I've prayed to Mother to keep knowledge of the Absolute away from him and cover his eyes with a veil of maya, because he has so much work to do. But the veil is so thin, it may be torn at any moment."

It has been said already that we have no continuous narrative of the last three and a half months of Ramakrishna's life. Saradananda's book ends with an account of the events of January 1st; M. takes us only to the last week in April. After that we have nothing but a few scattered reminiscences,

passed down to us from Sarada, Naren, Rakhal and other disciples and devotees. Their proper chronological order is sometimes uncertain.

Once, while Ramakrishna was hardly able to speak, he wrote on a piece of paper, "Naren will teach others." When Naren protested, Ramakrishna said, "you will have to. Your very bones will make you do it." On another occasion, he told Naren, "Rakhal has the keen intelligence of a king. If he chose, he could rule a kingdom." Naren understood his Master's intention in saying this. Next time the disciples were all seated together, Naren spoke in praise of Rakhal's greatness and announced, "from today, we shall call Rakhal our king." Henceforward, Rakhal was known familiarly as "Maharaj," Great Raja. Ramakrishna was delighted when they told him the new nickname. This was one of the many ways in which he strengthened those bonds of love which alone could hold the young monks together in their future time of trial.

HARI (Turiyananda) used in later years to tell the devotees an anecdote which illustrates the strange "play acting" aspect of Ramakrishna's illness.

"One day, I approached the Master's bed and asked him, 'Sir, how are you?' The Master replied, 'Oh, I am in great pain. I can't eat anything, and there's an unbearable burning in my throat.' But I wasn't fooled. I saw that the Master was still testing my devotion. For I knew that the Upanishads declare that the play of the Atman is all 'as if'—not actuality. The Atman never experiences any sickness or suffering. And a man of realization *is* the Atman."

"The more the Master complained, the clearer it was to me that I was being tested. Finally I couldn't control myself any longer. I burst out, 'Sir—whatever you may say, I see you only as an infinite ocean of bliss!'

"At this, the Master said to himself with a smile, 'this rascal has found me out!'"

DURING this terminal phase of the disease, Nag Mahashay visited Ramakrishna only occasionally, because he found it hard to bear the sight of the wasting body. On one of these visits, Ramakrishna welcomed him warmly, embraced him and then asked, "can *you* do anything to cure me? The doctors have failed."

Nag Mahashay possessed a psychic power by which he was able, if he wished, to transfer a patient's disease to his own body. He hesitated only for a moment; then, in the greatness of his devotion, he found courage and said in a firm voice, "yes, Sir, I can cure you. By your grace, I'll do it at once." He stepped forward and was about to lay his hands on Ramakrishna. But Ramakrishna pushed him away, saying, "oh yes—I know you could do *that*."

EARLY in August, Ramakrishna called Jogin and asked him to read aloud out of the Bengali almanac the days of the month Sravana, from the twenty-fifth (August 9th) onward. Jogin read on until he reached the last day of the month, which is August 15th in the Julian calendar. Ramakrishna then made a sign that he did not want to hear any more.

A FEW DAYS later, Ramakrishna summoned Naren to him. There was no one else in the room. Gazing fixedly at Naren, he passed into samadhi. Naren felt that a force somewhat like an electric current was taking possession of his body; slowly, he lost consciousness. When he came to himself again, he found Ramakrishna weeping. "Oh, Naren," he said, "I've just

given you everything I have—and now I'm as poor as a beggar! But these powers I've handed over to you will make you able to do great things in the world. When all that is accomplished, you can go back where you came from."

On August 13th, Naren was again in Ramakrishna's room, alone. The body on the bed seemed barely alive and quite preoccupied with its pain. *Could* this abjectly suffering creature be an incarnation of God? "If he would declare his divinity now in the presence of death," Naren said to himself, "I'd accept it." He was instantly ashamed of the thought and put it from his mind. For some moments he stood watching the Master's face intently. Then, slowly, Ramakrishna's lips parted and he said in a distinct voice, "Oh Naren—aren't you convinced yet? He who once was born as Rama, and again as Krishna, is now living as Ramakrishna within this body—and not in your Vedantic sense."

By adding "not in your Vedantic sense" Ramakrishna was, of course, emphasizing that he did not merely mean that he was essentially the Atman, as is every being and object, according to Vedanta Philosophy. Ramakrishna was explicitly declaring himself to be an avatar and the reincarnation of former avatars.

Throughout Sunday, August 15th, Ramakrishna appeared to be sinking. His pulse was irregular and shortly before dusk he began to breathe with difficulty. Nevertheless, he had the strength to say a loving and reassuring farewell to Sarada, who had come with Lakshmi to his bedside. "Listen," he told her, "it seems I'm to go away somewhere—all through water—to a place that's far off." When Sarada began to weep, he continued, "you mustn't be anxious. Your life will be just the same as it's been for so long. Naren and the others will look after you. They'll be as good to you as they've been to me. Take care of dear Lakshmi—"

During the evening, they tried to give him a little liquid food, but he could hardly swallow. While they were fanning him, he passed into samadhi and the body stiffened. The disciples feared that this must be the end. However, after midnight, he regained consciousness, said he was very hungry and, to their astonishment, took a full cup of porridge without apparent discomfort. He seemed refreshed by it. Naren now suggested that he should try to sleep. At this, Ramakrishna uttered the name of Kali three times in a clear ringing tone of which they would have supposed him physically incapable. Then he lay down, as if to sleep. He seemed to be quite comfortable, so Naren went downstairs to rest for a while.

Then, suddenly, a thrill passed through Ramakrishna's body, making its hair stand on end. The eyes became fixed on the tip of the nose. The face smiled. Ramakrishna was in samadhi. This happened at two minutes after one o'clock, early on Monday morning, August 16, 1886.

It proved to be his *mahasamadhi*—that final samadhi in which a knower of Brahman leaves the physical body. But the devotees were unable, as well as unwilling, to recognize it as such. Throughout the rest of the night, they watched and waited, with gradually diminishing hope. Girish Ghosh and Ramchandra Datta arrived; and, as morning dawned and the news spread around Calcutta, they were joined by many others. Vishwanath Upadhyaya refused to despair. He declared that there was still some heat in the body and began to rub the spine. When, at noon, Dr. Sarkar came to make an examination, he said that, in his opinion, death had actually occurred only half an hour previously.

At five o'clock that afternoon, Ramakrishna's body was brought downstairs and laid on a cot. It had been dressed in an ocher cloth and decorated with sandal paste and flowers. A photograph, to which I referred in the last chapter, was then

taken, at the suggestion of Dr. Sarkar. An hour later, to the accompaniment of devotional music, the body was carried to the nearby Baranagore ghat on the Ganges and there cremated—almost directly across the river from the spot on which the great temple of the Belur Math, Ramakrishna's monastery, would one day stand.

But the mourners that evening could not see that temple, or those other stately buildings, rising from the opposite bank to reassure them that the word and work of Ramakrishna would be carried on, from generation to generation, into the future. The last holy song was sung, the fire died down in the pit, the hot summer night fell on the unheeding city and the inconstant waters. Ramakrishna was gone from them in the flesh, leaving nothing tangible but these ashes which the devoted Shashi now collected in a copper urn. They were left alone with their loss.

Nevertheless, as the disciples walked back from the cremation-ground, they shed no tears. They all knew that their lives were committed, they could never desert each other now. They had nothing but their shared experience and their faith in the Master—and it was enough. So, with the courage of youth, they lifted up their voices and shouted, as if in triumph, *Jai Sri Ramakrishna!*

THE SYMPATHY FOR RELIGIONS

SWAMI SARADANANDA

THE SUBJECT this morning is the one peculiar feature of the religion of India. The whole history of India shows that—if example is better than precept, as the proverb says—the Indians have a glorious past and a bright present behind and around them in the field of religion to prove the utility and soundness of their all-embracing religious beliefs. Long before the Sun of Nazareth had arisen in the horizon of Palestine, long before the mighty Buddha had called his flock around and sent them all over Asia to preach the doctrine of sympathy and compassion, with especial directions not to revile any religion (for whoever reviles another religion injures not only that religion but also his own), there arose one in India who preached with the voice of thunder the active sympathy of all religions toward one another, based on the recognition of the fact that they all lead to the same goal. The author of the Bhagavad-Gita, the divine Krishna, found the solution of this vexed problem of the attitude of one religion toward another in these memorable words: "Whosoever comes to me through whatsoever way, I reach him. Know, all men are coming along the ways which in the end reach me." All through the history of India we find the practical carrying out of this wide principle in the field of religion. Never has there been a religious persecution in the land of the Hindus, and

never was individual liberty limited by society in the field of religion.

By sympathy the Vedantist does not mean a kind of dull indifference or haughty toleration, which seems to say, "I know you are wrong and my religion is the only true one, yet I will let you follow it; and perhaps one day your eyes will be opened." His sympathy is not a negative one, but it is of a direct, positive nature, which knows that all religions are true—they have the same goal. They are, as it were, parallel lines proceeding from the same point or the radii from one common center; or as a Vedantic poet expresses it in his beautiful language, "like the waters of the different rivers flowing through straight or winding paths and mingling with the ocean, losing all name and form, they all meet in Him, who is the one ocean of light and love."

Why should they quarrel then? Why may not I follow my own path, and at the same time help you actively and make the conditions of your traveling in your own path easier? This is the one great truth which the Vedanta has to give to the world. The Vedanta has never proselytized, never attempted to break this wonderful harmony of the religious orchestra of the universe by bringing it down to monotones, and yet wave after wave of spiritual thoughts and ideals have crossed the snows of the Himalayan peaks, toned the fanaticism in the dreary deserts of Persia and Arabia, beautified and enriched the beautiful land of the Greeks, and made the sublime more so in the land of the pyramids. The mission of the Vedanta to the West is not to make Christians Hindus, but to make the Christian a better Christian, the Hindu a better Hindu, and the Mohammedan a better Mohammedan; to convince men that in and through all these various religions there runs one common thread of truth: whatever way you go, you cannot but reach God. "He is the mover, the sustainer, the Lord, the

witness, the stay, the refuge, the friend of this universe," or as St. Paul says, "in Him we live and move and have our being." The Infinite is at the beginning of this evolution, and He is the end of it. The Vedanta, therefore, recognizes the one great fact, that there is unity in variety in the plan of nature; that however much there may be variety on any plane of existence, the physical, the mental, or the spiritual, yet in and through it there is that unity.

The second great fact on which the Vedantist builds his universal sympathy and toleration is that variation is necessary to evolution. What does evolution mean but the unfolding, the changing from one to another, and hence variation? Destroy variation, bring sameness in any field of nature, and you destroy evolution. And the universe is such a joined piece of mechanism, and nature is so uniform throughout, that this is not only true in the physical and the mental field, but also in the spiritual. Destroy variation, therefore, in the religious field, try to make all men think alike in religion, try to break down all religions and keep one in their place—you will find that you have destroyed religion itself. Then again we will find that as our attempts to make all men think alike will invariably fail, so it is impossible to bring one religion in place of the many. The many will survive as long as creation lasts. Recognize, therefore, this natural necessity of variation in the field of religion. Give every one of them its proper place, and know that they are all ways to attain to the Truth behind. The Truth will never change. It is beyond all changes of nature, beyond the realm of all law and causation. Yet the manifestation of this Truth in the field of law and causation is always partial and limited, and will always vary. Different ways will be discovered in different times to reach that Truth, and those different religions will be just as much true as those that exist at the present day.

FROM very old times man has tried to find the one common ground in which all religions meet. Attempts have been made in Alexandria, in Greece, and in many other places to cull truths from every religion and combine them into a new one. They have failed miserably, because they never recognized the truth that variation is necessary to evolution. They never recognized that all these religions are true, and suit minds in different stages of evolution. They never recognized that they all point toward the one great fact, that the end of evolution is to make man perfect by leading him into the superconscious state. Else how do we account for their general agreement on this point? Why do two religions which seem diametrically opposite in their rites and ceremonies and doctrines tell the same story here? In mystical ceremonies, in the garb of mythology, or in clear-cut philosophical language, they all speak the same truth, that man in his real nature is perfect and universal; that the little personalities grow and expand till they all find themselves to be the one universal individuality, infinite and perfect; that this is not something extraneous or the exclusive property of one man or some men, but that it is natural in every one and is the gradual unfolding of what is within. We in our ignorance think that the saying of Jesus that "I and my Father are one" is true in his case alone, or that when he said "Be ye therefore perfect as the Father in heaven is perfect" he is not to be taken literally. We in our foolish ignorance think that the superconscious stage, which transcends the realm of speech and thought, is a lower stage, a stage very much the same as the unconscious or the hypnotic stage brought about by the constant dwelling of the mind on one subject. Little do we dream in our arrogance that if the constant dwelling and concentration of the mind on one subject will produce hypnotism, we are already hypnotized by thoughts of love, money, power, or some such trifling thing

which today is and tomorrow will not be. Little do we stop to think that if the going beyond consciousness by thinking on God, developing all our faculties to their highest, and preserving all our energies from being squandered in the lower plane be a hypnotized condition, it is worse hypnotism to think, in the face of naked facts to the contrary, that we are free, that whatever our senses reach and reason thinks is true. Shake off all such foolish ideas, therefore, and follow your own religion, or whatever form of belief you believe in; know that nothing can destroy you. You create your own heaven or hell. "The kingdom of heaven is within you," and you will find it as soon as you like. Find that within. See that the universe is God's playground, that he has not left the management of it in the hands of anybody, and that man by whatever he is doing is coming nearer and nearer to the Deity.

Arguments have been raised to the effect that the preaching of universal sympathy and the toleration shown toward all religions will destroy religion entirely, will take off that intensity from men's religious belief which proceeds from the fact of their recognition that their religion alone is the true one. Shall we, then, let men continue in their faith in the infallibility of their own religion alone? Will it not be better not to open our eyes at all to the light which the researches of reason, of history, of science, and of real religion are bringing before us every day? The Vedanta answers in the first place: follow truth wherever it leads you. Truth will never conform itself to the individual or society, but the individual and society must conform themselves to it. Faith and belief gain their strength by being based on truth, but no amount of belief in any untruth will strengthen one's position.

Secondly, it is unreasonable and false to say that the sympathy that you extend toward other religions would be at the expense of the intensity of faith in your own. Believe as in-

tensely as you can in the infallibility of your own; follow it out in your daily life. At the same time believe that other religions are also as good in reaching God for minds which think differently from you. As in society there must be united action in conformity with the social laws, and also liberty for individual action, so also in the field of religion, every religion must have perfect individual freedom, and yet there must be active sympathy for all the others. Does the individual unit when acting in conformity with the social laws, trying to do good for the whole, limit his own personal freedom, or bring that good at the expense of the liberty of individual action? Hence active sympathy and toleration is only possible when we look upon other religions in the same light as we do our own, when we believe in the infallibility of not only our own but of other religions also. We will have to learn the great fact that if one religion is false the others are false also, and if one is true the others are true too. For if religion—and revelation—comes through the process of evolution, it cannot be the exclusive property of any one sect or any one individual. It is as common as God's wind and rain, which come both to the just and the unjust; it is like universal space, embracing everything that is sentient and insentient.

THE LAST MESSAGE OF SRI KRISHNA

SWAMI SATPRAKASHANANDA

SRI KRISHNA delivered his message, as is evident from literary records, on two significant occasions: 1) on the eve of the war of Kurukshetra, and 2) on the eve of his departure from the world. The first message, well-known as the Bhagavad-Gita (or Gita for short), was delivered to his friend and disciple Arjuna, on the very battlefield. The other message, which is evidently his second and last, was delivered to another devoted friend and disciple, Uddhava, not in a field of contest, but in a secluded and sacred place called Prabhasa, near the seacoast of Gujarat, north of Bombay. The Bhagavad-Gita, literally the "Song of God," though widely circulated as an independent book, is actually a small but pithy section of the voluminous Sanskrit epic the Mahabharata, a poetical work of ninety thousand couplets, perhaps the world's largest, being about seven times the size of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* put together.

The Last Message of Sri Krishna, which has not gained much circulation as an independent treatise, forms a part of one of the most authoritative Sanskrit scriptures, Srimad Bhagavatam (Section XI, chaps. 6-29). This sacred book (called the Bhagavatam for short), dwells specifically on the love of God and the knowledge of God. Sri Ramakrishna used

to remark that the Bhagavatam is fried in the butter of divine knowledge and soaked in the syrup of divine love. The Vaishnavas—the worshipers of Vishnu, the Omnipresent Preserver, who is all-love and all-bliss—hold this book in great veneration and consider it as authoritative as the Vedas. A small compendium of this book in lucid English, called *The Wisdom of God*, has been brought out by my brother disciple, Swami Prabhavananda, and is widely read by seekers of God, with much interest and profit.

There is no fundamental difference between the first and the last message so far as the central theme is concerned. But there is a difference in the methods of its presentation and the emphasis laid on certain aspects. Both messages center on the topic of the Highest Good and the means of its attainment. The Highest Good is defined by Vedanta as the cessation of all sufferings and the attainment of Supreme Bliss. This is the goal for which all are striving knowingly or unknowingly, directly or indirectly. Man is constantly struggling to overcome evil by good in some form or other. All human activities are directed to this end. What is the ultimate aim of this struggle? The removal of all evil and the attainment of the Supreme Good. After long, long experience in this world of dualities a person realizes that the unalloyed joy and the unmixed blessing that he has been seeking all along is not to be found anywhere in the relative order, where good and evil coexist. Then he is convinced that the supreme object of his search is God and God alone; it is He who is all-good beyond the pairs of opposites, such as birth and death, growth and decay, pain and pleasure, knowledge and ignorance, virtue and vice; it is by attaining Him that there remains nothing more to attain, it is by knowing Him that there remains nothing more to know.

Indeed, the attainment of the Highest Good means the realization of God, in whom is the culmination of knowledge,

the fulfillment of all desires, and the consummation of joy. When a person realizes God he discovers his essential unity with Him. He finds himself in Him. He is restored to his intrinsic divine nature. He is reinstated in his innate perfection. A seer does not see God apart from himself, not even as the greatest of all. God is not one of the many, but the inmost Self of one and all. He is the Reality underlying each and every phase of the manifold. He, the all-pervading Supreme Self, Pure Being-Consciousness-Bliss, is the unobserved observer of the order of phenomena. The imperfect world has perfection as its very basis and being. Though hidden in all physical objects, the self-effulgent Supreme Consciousness that God is shines even in the lowest orders of life more or less as sentiency, as the light of cognition. Consciousness is coextensive with livingness according to most biologists. It is the light that belongs solely to the cognizing self, the subject, and by no means to any part of the objective universe, physical or psychical. In human individuals the same Supreme Consciousness is clearly manifest as the knowing self distinct from the psychophysical system. This is why man alone is capable of realizing Him in the depth of his heart as the inmost Self beyond all limitations.

It is true that a devotee can see God in a particular form that represents divine power, love, or knowledge, or beauty, and is chosen by him to worship the Adorable One. God actually appears to him in the form of his Chosen Ideal. Such God-vision is not therefore a case of imagination or hallucination on the part of the devotee. Yet this is not the realization of God in the true sense. For after the vision, God may again disappear from the devotee's sight. But once a person realizes God as his very Self, as the Soul of all souls, he never loses sight of Him. Says Sri Krishna to Arjuna (Bhagavad-Gita, VI. 30):

He who sees Me in all things and sees all things in Me never becomes separated from Me, nor do I become separated from him.

But even momentary God-vision can be a prelude to the timeless transcendental experience.

THOUGH the ultimate goal is the same for one and all, yet the ways differ according to the seekers' tendencies, capacities, and situation in life. Sri Krishna has enunciated to Uddhava a triple means to the attainment of the Highest Good: the yoga of work (karma), the yoga of devotion (bhakti), and the yoga of knowledge (jnana)—the threefold way to God-realization. The word "yoga" properly means spiritual discipline—a method of God-realization, in other words, Self-realization. None but a spiritual aspirant, none but a seeker of the Highest Good is eligible for the practice of yoga in the true sense. Sri Krishna thus speaks of the efficacy of the three yogas and their suitability for different grades and types of spiritual aspirants (Bhagavatam XI:20.6-8):

The yogas of love, knowledge, and work have been given by me to men for their Highest Good. Except through these, there is no way to attain freedom. Of these, the yoga of knowledge is for those who desire nothing; for they, knowing every desire to be fraught with evil, have renounced work. Those who still have desires, and who are attached to work must follow the yoga of work. The yoga of love is successfully followed by those blessed mortals who take delight in Me and My word.

Those who are dutiful and virtuous and live a happy and contented life usually discern the inherent limitations of all temporal possessions and pleasures and turn to the search for

the eternal. It is on them that Sri Krishna enjoins the practice of karma yoga. Such spiritual aspirants as have worldly desires but are convinced of their futility and want to get rid of them and attain the Supreme Good must practice the yoga of work (karma). They should try to do their duties, domestic and social, without the ego-idea, surrendering the self to God, and giving up all claim to work and its results. It is the yoga of selfless work that prepares the mind for the practice of the yoga of devotion and the yoga of knowledge. It removes worldly attachment and intensifies the desire for the Supreme Good. As the mind is purified by the practice of karma yoga, the spiritual aspirant develops, according to his aptitude, a real interest either in the loving worship of the Personal God, or in the cultivation of Self-knowledge (that is, in the realization of the identity of the individual self with the Supreme Self). In the one case he acquires the competence for the practice of bhakti yoga (the path of devotion), and in the other for the practice of jnana yoga (the path of knowledge). Without the necessary preparation through karma yoga none can follow the path of devotion or the path of knowledge effectually. So says Sri Krishna to Uddhava (XI:20.9-11):

Work one must until the heart has become tranquil and free from desires. Work must be performed until one has come to love Me and to take delight in My word. By doing one's duties for the sake of duty and performing them as services unto Me, having no selfish end in view, one becomes free from both the good and evil effects of work. The yoga of work frees the mind from all evil tendencies and purifies the heart. Being thus purified one attains pure knowledge or pure devotion to Me.

As indicated by Sri Krishna, bhakti yoga and jnana yoga are the two direct ways to the realization of God; karma yoga

is preparatory to either of them. Bhakti yoga is the approach to Saguna Brahman, the Personal God, possessed of all blessed qualities, who, though without form, has special manifestations in forms as well. This is the path of devotion, characterized by the seeker's feeling of a loving relationship with the Divinity. Jnana yoga is the approach to Nirguna Brahman, the attributeless impersonal Absolute Being. This is the path of knowledge, characterized by the seeker's apprehension of the essential identity of the individual self with the Supreme Self. It is a steep course. It does not suit the average spiritual aspirant, in whom the body-idea prevails. After the realization of Saguna Brahman through bhakti yoga, it is not so difficult for him to realize the same as Nirguna if he desires it.

It is to be noted that bhakti yoga is not wholly an emotional approach nor is jnana yoga purely an intellectual method. There is ample scope for intellect in bhakti yoga, just as there is ample scope for emotion in jnana yoga. Yet the one is called the way of devotion because devotion is predominant in it, and the other is called the way of knowledge, because intellect is predominant in it. Unaided by reason and understanding, devotion is liable to misconception, prejudice, error, and bigotry. Similarly, the path of knowledge without the love for Truth lacks animation and turns into a dry mechanical process. There must be an ardent longing in the seeker's heart for the realization of the Truth grasped by the intellect. Unless the heart moves with the intellect, his search for God will prove to be similar to academic research. Without whole-souled devotion to Truth the mind of the seeker cannot be tranquil and transparent enough for its revelation or immediate apprehension.

A follower of the path of devotion (bhakti) or a follower of the path of knowledge (jnana) does not necessarily have to give up his duties, although they are no longer im-

perative for his inner purification. Along with the practice of the yoga of bhakti or the yoga of jnana he can continue to perform them with complete self-renunciation. Karma in such a case is a form of devotion or knowledge. It promotes the aspirant's love for God and his knowledge of God and thus becomes a means of liberation. So says Sri Krishna (XI:18.44-47): ॐ

He who worships Me constantly and exclusively, through the performance of his duties, knowing My presence in all beings, soon attains to steadfast devotion to Me. O Uddhava, through his undying devotion he comes to Me, the great Lord of all beings, the originator and destroyer [re-absorber] of all, their cause, the Brahman. Having his mind thus purified by the performance of his duties, and knowing My Divinity, he becomes endowed with knowledge and realization and soon attains to Me. All his duty, consisting of specific rites, of those belonging to the castes and orders of life, if attended with devotion to Me becomes supreme and conducive to liberation.

Evidently, Sri Krishna does not consider raja yoga as a means of God-realization, since he clearly states that except through these three—the yogas of karma (work), bhakti (devotion), and jnana (knowledge) there is no way to attain freedom. But actually he does not exclude raja yoga from the methods of God-realization, inasmuch as its practical courses are included in the three other yogas mentioned by him. Patanjali's yogic method is based on the Samkhya system of philosophy with minor differences. So far as the philosophical background of his raja yoga is concerned, Vedanta disagrees on many points. But its practical methods of self-realization are mostly adapted to the Vedantic disciplines. Indeed, the eight steps of raja yoga are in a sense the common features of

the moral and spiritual courses followed by the seekers of God in most religions.

IN BOTH the messages Sri Krishna delineates the three methods of God-realization—the yogas of karma, bhakti, and jnana, which cover all the spiritual disciplines prevalent in different religions. As such, both messages have universal significance. But in the one he lays emphasis on karma yoga, while in the other on bhakti yoga. The reason is this: The first message was delivered to Arjuna, who was fit for the practice of karma yoga, while the last message was delivered to Uddhava, who was capable of practicing bhakti yoga. Though both messages are intended for all types of spiritual aspirants, yet the direct appeal of the one is to a follower of karma yoga, while the direct appeal of the other is to a follower of bhakti yoga. The different yogas suit spiritual aspirants of different grades as well as tendencies. They can therefore be practiced by the same spiritual aspirant according to his stage of development. The Vedantic teachers impart spiritual as well as moral instruction in view of the pupils' capabilities and situation in life. Their aim is to lead every individual at whatever level of life to the highest goal by progressive courses suited to his inner resources and environmental conditions. It may be asked in this context—why does Sri Krishna take pains to explain to either disciple other yogas than what he is ready for? The answer is: In order to fully explain the meaning and the application of any one of the yogas it is necessary to define its exact position in man's spiritual life in relation to other yogas. Moreover, these were occasions for the Divine Teacher to promulgate his message for different types of spiritual aspirants wherever they might be.

Arjuna was a man of heroic nature, distinguished for his

valor. He was the third of the five sons of King Pandu. As a leading member of the ruling (kshatriya) class, it was his primary duty to uphold justice, to subdue the wicked, to protect the virtuous, and to maintain peace and order. Accompanied by his four brothers, he had come to the battlefield as the commander-in-chief of the Pandava army in order to restore their kingdom forcefully seized by their wily and powerful cousins, the Kauravas. As he surveyed the huge array of troops of the belligerent powers ready to strike, he noticed on both sides his kinsmen and elders prepared to sacrifice their lives for the sake of the paltry kingdom. Commiseration for their lives on the one hand and, on the other, the stern call of duty to wage a just war regardless of their lives created a conflict in Arjuna's mind. But grief combined with sentimentality, proceeding from his attachment to his kith and kin and the venerable ones, prevailed over his sense of duty. Bewildered, he wanted to quit the battlefield and don the garb of a mendicant, not knowing how it would misfit his warlike heroic disposition. At this juncture he laid aside his weapons and begged instruction of Sri Krishna, who had assumed the role of his charioteer. The Divine Teacher pointed out his mistake and urged him to fight as a karma yogi, while explaining to him the full significance of each of the three yogas. After receiving the message Arjuna engaged in battle, free from all doubts and fears.

But the case of Uddhava was different. He was of a saintly disposition. He functioned as a state counselor, and not as a warrior. Moreover, he had outgrown all worldly attachment and developed pure devotion to God. He was capable of living the contemplative life of a devotee dedicated to the realization of the Divine Being, the one Self of all. His problem was not, as in the case of Arjuna, whether to fight or not to fight, but how to get free from all bondages and attain the Supreme Goal.

While Arjuna was urged to fight against the wrongdoers, Sri Krishna instructed Uddhava to follow the principle of non-resistance to evil and even illustrated this with a story. To quote him in part (XI:22.57,58):

Even though scolded by the wicked, or insulted, ridiculed, calumniated, beaten, bound, robbed of his living or spat upon, or otherwise abominably treated by the ignorant—being thus variously shaken and placed in dire extremities, the man who desires his well-being should deliver himself by his own effort [through patience and discrimination].

Sri Krishna recognizes Uddhava's devotional nature and recommends to him the way of a lover of God (XI:11.29-32):

Compassionate, with enmity to no creature, forbearing, with truth as his strength, of an unimpeachable mind, the same to all, benefactor of all beings; with his intellect unsullied by desires, a master of his organs, mild, pure, without possessions, without outward activity, with measured diet, a master of his mind, steady, having Me as his refuge, and meditative.

Ever alert, of a balanced mind, with fortitude, a master of the sixfold evil [hunger and thirst, grief and infatuation, decay and death], seeking no name, yet giving honor to others, expert, friendly [to those who are happy], merciful [to those who are in misery], and illumined.

He who knowing the merits and demerits [of duty and its opposite] gives up all his formal duties even as sanctioned by Me, and worships Me, is also the best among sages.

Throughout his last message Sri Krishna emphasizes the path of devotion. After hearing him, Uddhava, with all his doubts dispelled, with his misconceptions cleared, and fears chased

away, repairs, as instructed by the teacher, to a remote and sacred place in the solitude of the Himalayas, called Badarik-ashrama. It is situated near the source of the Alakananda, the second tributary of the Ganges in the high mountain ranges.

To Uddhava, Sri Krishna describes in detail the various practical courses for the cultivation of devotion. These form, broadly speaking, three distinct modes of worship: 1) physical, 2) verbal, and 3) mental. The physical methods of worship consist of service to the temple, service to the devotees of God, making pilgrimages, obeisance to the altar and to men of God, worshipping the Deity with offerings of flowers, incense, light, food, etc., the observance of festivals, and so forth. The verbal methods include speaking about God, reading and writing about Him, hearing about Him, chanting His glory, singing devotional songs, recounting the lives and deeds of the divine incarnations, saints, and seers, and the repetition of a sacred word or formula over and over again (inaudibly, semi-audibly, or audibly). The mental methods have such forms as remembering God at all times, self-surrender to the divine will, contemplation of God whenever possible, and the regular practice of meditation on Him. Physical and verbal methods prepare the ground for the mental method. They make the worshiper God-minded. No worshiper can very well remember God, or resign himself to God, or contemplate on Him, or can ever truly meditate on Him until he develops genuine interest in God as the sole and supreme object of love and worship.

EVEN a single method of worship followed by a seeker of God steadily from day to day, according to his capacity and condition of life, will invariably generate devotion within his heart. The cultivation of devotion is but the manifestation of

love for God that is latent within man. Each individual is a potential lover of God. He is a born seeker of Him and Him alone. Through his search for prosperity, for power, for happiness, for knowledge, or beauty, or love, a man is seeking, knowingly or unknowingly, rightly or wrongly, the very source of all these, the Ultimate One, where is the perfection of all that the human mind aspires after. What man really seeks is not something limited or imperfect, but its very perfection. Where else but in God, the Ideal, the Perfect One, does this exist? It is but the love for Him that, being misdirected, finds expression as greed or lust.

Of the various methods for the cultivation of devotion to God, the most efficacious is the association with the holy. He who gains devotion through holy association finds no difficulty in realizing God, declares Sri Krishna (XI:11.25, 48; 12.3):

He who worships Me, attaining devotion for Me through association with sages, easily realizes My state taught by the sages.

O Uddhava, there is almost no other efficient way except the bhakti yoga due to the association with sages, for I am the goal of the sages.

It was through the association with saints, O stainless one, that many who were of an ambitious or indolent nature attained Me in different ages.

Thorough cleansing of the human mind is not possible by any other means than through devotion to God. Says Sri Krishna (XI:14.19, 21, 22):

As fire kindled into a blaze burns the faggots to ashes, so, O Uddhava, devotion to Me totally destroys all sins.

I, the dear Self of the pious, am attainable by devotion alone, which is the outcome of faith. Devotion to Me purges even the low-born of their congenital impurity.

Piety joined to truthfulness and compassion, or learning coupled with austerity, never wholly purifies a mind which is devoid of devotion to Me.

As the alloy in gold cannot be extracted by any such means as washing, wiping or polishing it but through the process of smelting it, even so a man's subtle impressions of past karma buried in the subsoil of the mind cannot be eradicated by any physical, mental, or moral method but by the generation of devotion within his heart. In the words of Sri Krishna (XI:14.33):

As gold smelted by fire gives up its dross and gets back its real state, so the mind by means of systematic devotion to Me winnows off subtle impressions of past karma and attains to Me.

Sri Krishna praises the path of devotion and exhorts Uddhava to follow it (XI:14.20; 19.19, 27; 20.32, 33):

O Uddhava, neither yoga, nor knowledge, nor piety, nor study, nor austerity, nor renunciation captivates Me so much as a heightened devotion to Me.

O pure-minded one, I have already expounded the philosophy of devotion to thee, but since thou hast special liking for it, I shall again describe the chief means to the attainment of devotion to Me.

That religion is called the best which makes for devotion to Me; knowledge is the realization of the unity of Self.

Whatever is acquired through works, austerities, knowledge, dispassion, yoga, or charity, or through any other means of well-being, My devotee easily attains to it through devotion to Me—aye, even heaven, or liberation, or My abode, should he care to have it.

Sri Krishna instructs graphically how a devotee by practicing meditation on God with form can realize the Formless One (XI:14.42-45):

One should meditate on this form, concentrating the mind on all the features. The man of self-control should withdraw the organs from the sense-objects with the help of the mind, and with the intellect as guide direct the mind to My whole body. Then one should concentrate the mind—distributed all over My body—on one part, and think of the smiling countenance alone and nothing else.

Drawing the mind which is concentrated on that, one should fix it on the Supreme Cause [the Lord as projecting the universe]. Then leaving that too, one should rest on Me [Pure Brahman divested of all attributes] and think of nothing whatsoever [state of samadhi]. With one's mind thus absorbed, one sees Me alone in oneself and sees oneself united to Me, the Self of all—like light united to light.

It is a rare privilege to be born as a human being. Self-realization is not possible in any other life. Sri Krishna stresses the importance of human life and its blessings (XI:20.17; 26.1):

Getting the first and foremost requisite, viz. a human body, which is like a strong boat—so difficult to secure, yet attained somehow—with the teacher as its helmsman, and propelled by Me as by a favorable wind—with such means as these, the man who does not strive

to cross the ocean of transmigration—the rounds of birth and rebirth—commits suicide.

Obtaining a human body, which gives a glimpse of My nature, a man, by practicing the religion of love for me, realizes me, the all-blissful Paramatman, who dwells in his heart.

The culmination of devotion is in seeing and worshipping God in all living beings. Here devotion is united with supreme spiritual vision. The highest devotion is inseparable from the highest knowledge. It is said in the Bhagavatam (XI:2.45-47):

He who sees the divine Self in all beings and all beings in the divine Self is the best devotee of God. He who bears love to God, friendship to His devotees, kindness to the ignorant, indifference to his foes, is of the second best type, and he who faithfully worships God only in the image, and not His devotees or others, is a novice.

Just as God is worshiped in an image, even so He can be worshiped in a living being as the indwelling Self. In his last message Sri Krishna speaks highly of this form of worship, which has not been expressly stated by him in the Bhagavad-Gita. Says he to Uddhava (XI:29.12-15, 17-19, 22):

With a pure mind one should observe in all beings as well as in oneself only Me, the Atman, who am both within and without, and all-pervasive like space.

O great soul, he who, taking his stand on pure knowledge, thus regards and honors all beings as Myself, who has the same attitude towards a low-born one as to a Brahmana, towards a thief as to a supporter of the Brahmanas; towards a spark of fire as to the sun; and towards a ruffian as to a kind man; he is considered a sage.

Ideas of rivalry, jealousy, pity and egoism quickly depart from a man who always thinks of Me in all men.

One should worship thus in thought, word, and deed till one comes to look upon all beings as Myself.

To such a man everything is Brahman, owing to the knowledge that comes of seeing the Atman in all. Seeing Brahman everywhere, he becomes free from doubts and all attachment.

This looking upon all beings as Myself in thought, word, and deed is, to My mind, the best of all methods of worship.

Herein lies the wisdom of the wise and the acumen of the intelligent, that in this very life they attain Me, the Real and Immortal, by means of that which is unreal and mortal.

That this mode of seeing and worshiping God in all beings is natural with the seers and the lovers of God who attain illumination has been affirmed by the Upanishads and by later Vedantic literature. Rare individuals, highly advanced in spiritual life, have also carried this idea into actual practice. But so far the seekers of God in general have not adopted this way of worship as a spiritual discipline. Such a course has been recommended for the first time by Sri Ramakrishna in the present age. "No, not kindness to living beings," urges he, "but service to God dwelling in them." Further he remarks:

It is God who exists in all forms, though His manifestations differ.

If God can be worshiped through a clay image, then why not through a man?

It was the genius of Swami Vivekananda to find new light in this precept of the Master and seek its practical application in modern life for the amelioration of man's condition

in every sphere. He exhorts the worshipers of God to follow this method:

Look upon every man, woman, and every one as God. You cannot help anyone; you can only serve; serve the children of the Lord, serve the Lord Himself, if you have the privilege. If the Lord grants that you can help any one of His children, blessed you are; do not think too much of yourselves. Blessed you are that that privilege was given to you, when others had it not. Do it only as worship.

You may invent an image through which to worship God, but a better image already exists, the living man. You may build a temple in which to worship God, and that may be good, but a better one, a much higher one, already exists; the human body.

In Swami Vivekananda's view all social work and the teaching of religion as well should be carried on in the spirit of worshipping God in man. For this purpose he established the Ramakrishna Math and Mission—a religious and philanthropic institution that has developed into a world-wide organization—the monastic and lay members of which are urged to render service to the ignorant, the needy, the distressed, and the diseased as the veritable worship of God dwelling in them.

SOME may hold that the message of Sri Krishna, which was delivered several millenniums ago, must be too old for the modern age; like many theories, views, and usages of former days, it must be antiquated. It is true that the world is progressing continually, particularly in physical and intellectual aspects. With the advancement of science and technology there have been tremendous changes in man's way of living and thinking. In this space-age we do not live in the same world as

our forbears did. Naturally, one may ask, "How can the teachings that applied to life centuries ago be adequate for the present age?"

But the message of Sri Krishna is basically eternal and universal. It cannot be obsolete, being grounded on fundamental truths that ever remain the same. These can be stated as follows:

1) The ever-changing manifold is sustained by the Changeless one, the all-pervading Self, we call God.

2) Man's restive psychophysical system is regulated by a central principle, his conscious immortal Self.

3) There is a kinship or unity between the individual self and the Supreme Self.

4) To realize this kinship or unity is the goal of life.

Moreover, the message of Sri Krishna has for its setting the common background of human life that undergoes no change. This is the same old drama of smiles and tears, of love and hate, of union and separation, of success and failure, that is going on the world over. From the primitive to the modern life the same old tragi-comedy has continued to be enacted in the East, in the West, in the North, in the South, in every home from the king's palace to the farmer's cottage. Despite man's marvelous achievements, despite all distinctions of color, creed, culture, position and power, human life is invariably a drama of birth, growth, decay and death. Notwithstanding this, there is within the heart of man a deep longing for the eternal, a constant cry for release from all confusion, all fear, all delusions, all bondage, all limitations. As long as this basic human situation remains unaltered, Sri Krishna's message will evoke irresistible response from the hearts of men and women at all times and in all places. It will serve as the beacon for erring human beings to find the way from darkness to light, from death to immortality, from bondage to freedom.

WHAT VEDANTA MEANS TO ME

DORINE SHEPHERD

WHAT does Vedanta mean to the householder in the American setting? Of course it must mean something different to each of us. Finding what Vedanta has to offer is an exciting and differing experience for each individual, whether he later becomes a devotee or an initiate, or remains simply a casual visitor.

I believe that only having undergone certain experiences by way of preparation, whether it is in this life, or in previous lives, will the individual be ready for Vedanta. This, I feel, is particularly true for the Westerner in the peculiar circumstance of secularism and materialism in which his culture is declining and in which he finds himself. One must be ready, as it were, to have the seed of Vedanta sprout. As for an exotic plant, the soil must have been carefully prepared.

This assumption granted, as it must be, and having found a hint of the possibilities of realizing, as St. Augustine put it "the City of God," what were my feelings on reaching the "suburbs?"

When I was a child, going forcibly to Sunday school, I felt over and over again the lack of learning about God. Rarely did the teacher mention him. Instead, we discussed current social problems. Where were the signposts of the guru or teacher to keep us on the right road that would lead us through the winding streets of the suburbs to the heart of the City

itself? They were lacking. Instead there was a growing void. Then, a few years older, and through the Lord's grace, I was twice led to the edge of experience, where I felt on the brink of a chasm where all reason for all existence was to be found. But without a guru's guidance, I did not know how to proceed past the very edge of the infinite possibility lying just beyond. Even so, I have remembered these experiences and the feelings which they produced, although they happened more than fifteen years ago.

Years followed upon each other; each containing something good and something "not so good." The sharp edge of the crusader's sword of youth became dulled under the grating roughness of reality. Then, during a visit to India, I learned about the Vedanta Society of Southern California. I lived not too very far from it, and at one time I had lived only a few blocks from the New York Center without knowing it existed! An elderly brahmin, trained in law, first mentioned the Hollywood Center to me. This fine person and others like him went out of their way to make a stranger welcome among them. In meeting him, and others like him, I felt myself at one in this atmosphere where God was a simple fact of everyday life. I had traveled fourteen thousand miles to hear of Vedanta.

When I came back to the States, I felt homesick for what I had left. I felt strange and a stranger in the country of my birth. When, after a few weeks, I entered the Hollywood Vedanta Temple, I knew at once that I had found again what I had left—the lovely place where God was accepted as a simple fact. In a sense, it is true that one "can't go home again." But I feel that in a far greater sense it is possible, and that I have indeed come home again, to God.

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD's forthcoming biography of Sri Ramakrishna has been serialized in *Vedanta and the West*, beginning in #136. Entitled *Ramakrishna and His Disciples*, it will be published in book form in the United States, England, and India.

SWAMI SARADANANDA (1865-1927) was one of the five monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna who had visited the West. He lectured on Vedanta in London and New York for two years before returning to India in 1898 to become the first secretary of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission. The Swami wrote the definitive life of Sri Ramakrishna, translated into English as *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*.

"The Sympathy for Religions," reprinted from *Lectures, Literary and Religious*, was delivered by Swami Saradananda in the United States. Published by the Brahmavadin Press in 1898, it is reprinted in *Vedanta and the West* through the courtesy of the Ramakrishna Math, Madras.

SWAMI SATPRAKASHANANDA's article, which begins on page 43 of the present issue, is based on a lecture given by the Swami at the Santa Barbara Temple of the Vedanta Society of Southern California on August 26, 1962. English translations of the Sanskrit texts from the Bhagavatam are mainly from Swami Madhavananda's *The Last Message of Sri Krishna* and from Swami Prabhavananda's *The Wisdom of God (Srimad Bhagavatam)*.

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makes me think I am singular. Getting rid of the idea of being separate and special is the one thing needful. But all efforts to expel the ego seem in vain. It refuses to be evicted.

Then how does this renunciation of ego take place? It seems to me that it occurs only as we open ourselves up to—and consciously sustain—discipline. Pain will burn out what we cannot throw out. This is why we must have a guru and the association of other devotees. Both will discipline us greatly!

A sad story concerns a young man who came to a certain teacher with the idea of becoming his disciple. The teacher accepted the applicant provisionally. In due course he asked the would-be student to do some menial task. "But," objected the young man, "I am a college graduate." The teacher withdrew the request courteously. But that was the end of this boy; he never became a disciple.

As for association with other devotees, the same kind of test occurs; and our response must be positive. New people come to Vedanta, enthusiastically expecting to share experiences pleasantly with others on the same path. After a while, perhaps, interpersonal strains develop. Trying episodes occur, and some fall away. Devotees would embrace a religion that emphasizes renunciation of the ego; but some of them, as soon as a little disciplining comes, retreat.

This will not do. The mother is slapping the child; and the child is clinging to the mother's knees, crying, "Mother, Mother." That is the way it must be. The one thing needful is: Don't give up; don't quit. Cling and be disciplined. This is the meaning of the emphasis placed by Ramakrishna's disciples on patience and perseverance.

If we will but cling to our teacher and other devotees, howling perhaps at the blows they give us, but not letting go, that which we cannot do for ourselves will be done for us. The ego we would renounce but cannot will be ground away.

Vedanta and the West

Vedanta teaches that man's real nature is divine; that it is the aim of man's life to unfold and manifest this divinity; and that truth is universal. Vedanta accepts all the religions of the world and reveres the great prophets, teachers, and sons of God, because it recognizes the same divine inspiration in all.

STUDENT'S NOTEBOOK

No. 27

It is well known that renunciation is the main requirement for spiritual attainment. Many mystics have said so; books of spiritual instruction emphasize this point.

I do not doubt that this is true. But how does one do it? Efforts to divest myself of worldly desires and habits have convinced me that I cannot renounce at all. Like slops thrown out into a high wind, that which I would rid myself of blows back upon me. Burrs plucked from my sleeve transfer themselves to my glove.

Oh, if by renunciation one means giving away one's possessions, quitting one's job, or turning over to someone else one's proper responsibilities—yes, anybody can do that. But these are not necessarily the things that have to go; they just have to stop being important in our lives.

It is that vigorous entity called the ego that I must divest myself of—the monster inside me that

Concluded on page 64